DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 972 CG 023 792

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TITLE Adolescent Women: Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going?
PUB DATE Sep 91
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Women's Studies Annual Conference (5th, Bowling Green, KY, September, 26-28, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Females; *Futures (of Society); Individual Development; Parent Child Relationship; Role Perception; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the crucial exchange between the future of women and the future of adolescent girls who are presumably trying to become successful women. In order to discuss the issues involved in helping young adults, this paper focuses on four themes: (1) adolescent girls and their mothers are confused about what adolescent roles are supposed to be in society today; (2) adolescents seem to sense a feeling of worthlessness and a lack of stamina in their own sense of guidance; (3) the lack of inner strength reinforces feelings of helplessness and anger in the adolescent; and (4) adults around the adolescent are as confused as their children, and the children are angry about that confusion. The paper contends that for the most part anger, frustration, and alienation fill the lives of many adolescents who cannot seem to find themselves and an inner direction to achieve a satisfying identity. It claims that in a complicated and technological society, adolescents need to know where they fit; they need to know they are valued and that they can make a contribution. The paper concludes that whatever the self-sufficiency, distance, alienation, and unreachable levels perceived in the adolescents' posture, it is not always reflective of what they deeply feel. They may be hoping that someone will rescue them from their own boredom. (LLL)

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Fifth Annual WKU Women's Studies Conference
September 26-28, 1991

Women: Where Are We Going... Where Have We Been?

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"Adolescent Women: Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going?"

Introduction

This paper emphasizes the crucial exchange between the future of women and the future of adolescent girls who are presumably trying to become successful women. We need to consider the age range between 13 to 16 as one phase of adolescence, and 17 to 19 as the later phase of adolescence. Girls in those age categories are faced with extremely difficult problems that vary greatly even though the teen years are categorized as though the girls are homogeneous in all stages of physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and social development. The differences among them, however poses an intellectually staggering set of problems.

Four Themes

In order to discuss the issues involved in helping young adults, this paper devotes itself to four themes: First, that adolescent girls, and their mothers as well, are confused about what adolescent roles are supposed to be in society today; second, that American adolescents seem to sense a feeling of worthlessness and a lack of stamina in their own sense of guidance; third, that the lack of inner strength reinforces feelings of helplessness and anger in the adolescent; and fourth, that adults around the adolescent are as confused as their children and the children are angry about that confusion. They want answers that will help them.

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The mixed messages that adolescents receive today about who we are as we try to define our own roles as adults in today's society, are leaving them in a helpless mire of undefined direction. Their anger and frustration is evident as they try to achieve some clarity for themselves.

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Although they want the approval of their parents, they are not very sure that their parents are models that they wish to follow. Consequently we have a relentless, adversarial contact sport between adolescent and gender identity.

The **first theme** touches on the confusion that adolescent girls as well as their mothers face on what society expects of them today. At one moment in time, the mother knows that she has to tell her daughter of certain values that should be respected. At another moment, after she has heard that another idea is relevant, she may try to enforce it with her daughter. The media messages in books, popular magazines, television, theater present many different concepts. Some of those concepts seem to "work,"--that is, the concept seems to bring satisfaction of some sort to the adolescent. The mixture of messages plus the great number of them are confusing. They do not agree because they are the ideas of many different people from different backgrounds. The adolescent, however, as well as the mother, have to sort out which values seem relevant and appropriate for them.

American society, made up of women from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, has changed radically in the last twenty five years. This represents a mixture of women from about three or four generations who live in the present age and have their own views about what life is all about. Women have gone through hearing about various definitions of their roles and what they should be doing working outside their homes as well as what obligations they have to the home, children, husband, parents, grandparents.

Along with the technological elements of a changing society offering an accelerated pace of women's activities, come the difficulties involved in making choices and the guilt when those choices focus heavily on ourselves rather than on our families. In an era when everyone is told to do what we need to do in order to make ourselves "feel good," and that our mental health is important in this regard, we are bound to feel an imbalance. Doing things for others will bring deep satisfaction to us from an expression of feelings of love from others who appreciate us.

Sociological perspectives are taken by looking at society's responses to personal behavior. The term, "society", as used in this paper, refers to people who have similar norms and values and may interact with one another. We may not interact on a direct and personal basis with people of similar values and beliefs, but we may guide our own behavior in similar ways. We may agree with certain values we read in the newspaper presented by a specific group or society.

With a mixture of people in our current society on American soil, we are hearing various impressions about the "right" or "decent" ways to conduct ourselves. Perhaps some of the newcomers to the United States are trying to emulate what they think is "American." Perhaps they are not. Perhaps some women are trying to continue to sustain their beliefs they learned in their country of native birth. The way that we are able to obtain ideas about the way women think is to conduct research or polls. In a democratically based country, our social values tell us that we are not to impose upon an individual's private views and beliefs, except of course, if that individual is a danger to society.

The confusion about what is right or wrong in terms of how we should conduct ourselves as women is pervasive. Some of us are more sure of ourselves at certain times than at others. But given the fact that many of the vestiges of trying to please others are left from earlier generations, many women are still puzzled about how they can obtain what they want for themselves and still have a sense of well-being about who they are and what they want to do. If adult women are unsettled and uncertain, what are the implications for the advice and examples obtained by adolescent girls? This is for each one of us to work out and decide. There are no easy answers for any of us. This brings us to the second theme of the paper.

The **second theme** touches on an extremely significant aspect of adolescence. This focuses on the feelings of worthlessness and a lack of stamina that adolescents seem to sense.[1] Aitken and Chaplin say that we seem to do whatever we can to disempower our adolescents: we don't let them work and we place them in "huge, anonymous high schools where they can't really form powerful identities."[2] From what we know in psychological terms, we know that a lack of identity and feelings of worthlessness can lead to the most destructive of tendencies. We know that without help toward directions of feeling worthy, many people lose a desire to live. Adolescent suicides are high. In part, their confusion in self-guidance contributes to feelings of suicide.

The ideals we suggest for our adolescents often are interpreted in terms of an "either-or," or a perfectionist point of view. Adolescents think that unless their behavior **perfectly** measures up to someone's view -- someone they particularly want to please, that is-- they are **complete failures**. This is why they have a tendency to have these high and low moods, or extreme mood shifts. Often they do not understand why they feel so depressed. Sometimes they do know why. Without **support**, however, for these tremendously strong emotions, they will blame themselves for things that do not fit a rationale for that self-blame. What they may do is to accept the responsibility for something that may have been beyond their control.

[1]David Aitken and June Chaplin, "Sex Miseducation," Networker. Alien Nation: Life in Teenage America," July/August, 1990, p. 27.

[2]Aitken and Chaplin, loc. cit.

The naivete of an adolescent who is just beginning to find out about life's various contradictions, and the fact that everybody seems to play life's game by using different rules, can create a self-punishing individual. It is easy to think one is inadequate and not pleasing to our parents, friends or teachers when we are not aware that perfection is not necessarily expected of us. The adolescent concept of what perfection is, may really be an expectation that goes beyond life's possibilities of human behavior. Often an adolescent does not know it. Many adolescents instead, chastize themselves for being dumb or ridiculous. They think that the target person or image of their love considers them unworthy. The negativism is debilitating. The frustration is actively corrosive. The feelings of being unsuccessful at every turn are pervasive. Further, as many of us know, these feelings do not necessarily leave us after our adolescent stage of life; they may become slightly more within our control, however. We **hope**, at least, that as we mature, this **advance** occurs in our thinking and emotional character to some extent. Otherwise, it would be difficult to sustain the psychological and emotional hills and valleys in our lives.

It becomes more clear as we discuss any patterns of our existence in lives and any direction of self-guidance, that the adult has to have some ideas as to what are expected of the adolescent. It requires yet **another** set of skills on the part of adults to know how to transmit these recommended values to our young. Often in our earnestness to let an adolescent know in essence how very important it is to be self-directing, to be strong, to have stamina so that one is able to go against the "tide" of undesirable forces, we sound moralizing. We sound as though we do not understand what the adolescent is feeling, thinking, or desiring. We sound as though we were never ever younger than we are today. We sound as though we never experienced indecisiveness, fear, anxieties, and intimidation. Of course, we have to understand as well that we **do not** understand many aspects of an adolescent's life today. We **cannot** be a peer group member and truly know how it feels to be an adolescent today with all the competing and contradictory choices they have to face.

Our memories of what we actually experienced in our own period of adolescence are also clouded by time, by our changing perspectives about life, by our desire to keep our own self-images intact, and our desire to present a self-image to our children or to our students that we want them to have of us. In any case, our transmission or the **way we present an idea** to our adolescents does not always come across to them as sincere, real, or empathic. They typically think that we are completely out of touch with the realities and internal dilemmas they are experiencing. They typically shut out **any** possibility that we may have any awareness of what they may feel in an emotional sense of frustration or fears. They do not think we are the people who are capable of giving them the advice and strength they need for self-guidance. They feel **they** are at a very different and unique stage from the one in which **we** are as we stand face to face with them now. How can we **dispute** the fact that they are different people, live in a different world environment, and have been brought up by people different from our own parents and their values, and that have indeed **had** experiences that are very different from ours? These contradictory views and imbalancing scales bring us to the third theme of this paper.

The **third theme** focuses on the adolescent's anger and helplessness that result in a lack of inner strength. A note of caution has to be made. Not **every** adolescent experiences these feelings. Some may bypass them because of the stability and support given by a family or other significant people. Human beings are not homogeneous. We vary in many ways. We vary by age, background, experiences, birth, heritage, and health that affect the way we live, financial limitations, intellectual skills, vocabulary capacities and the way we relate to others.

All the role sets in which we are involved such as mother-daughter, father-daughter, grandmother-grandchild, teacher-student role set all affect and relate to the way we interact with others. We learn the ways of interacting from all those people. They suggest ideas to us in terms of what they learned. Their views are as limited as our own. We are formulating new ideas for relating to people just as they learned before we came along. We develop stamina in our experiences in life by gaining more confidence in successful relationships. But as adolescents, we encounter a great deal of trial and error. We are trying out many

different ways of relating to others. We may often repeat a set of behaviors which may have been successful in one case, but not in another. Particularly in adolescence, we are experimenting more often than not. It is also at that time that adolescent youngsters wish to appear in control and to look as though they know exactly what they are doing. They want to "be cool."

When one considers the importance of feeling the emotional support of one's group as a contributor to one's well being, one must remember how varied the ethnic ties are. For example, according to the work of Mary Waters in her study, Ethnic Options, "The declining residential segregation of white ethnic groups, declining occupational specialization, increasing intermarriage, social mobility, and distance in time and generations from the original immigrants all decrease the isolation of the ethnic group that has maintained its cohesiveness."[3] Ethnic support may be absent.

We have to remember that ethnic mixtures also bring the teenager to various situations that confuse his or her value system. Waters indicates that the social world of people becomes less involved or tied to original ethnic groups and reduces the meaning of one's original culture. She is not making any value judgements here. She is merely describing the outcome of her study.

3 Mary C. Waters, Ethnic Options , Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. p. 4.

In a study by Offer et al, The Teenage World, a chapter on 'Becoming an Adult in the World," indicated that among their middle-class population they found two groups in dealing with their psychological worlds. One group seemed to be happy most of the time, "thinks about the kind of work they will do in the future and cares about others."[4] The other group was different. The adolescent in the other group is "frequently sad, very lonely, empty emotionally, finds no solution to life's endless problems, and may even rather die than go on living."[5]

Some writers lament the fact that teenagers are increasingly segregated into age groups and set aside, having little to do with adults. Being allowed to go off and do what they wish does not increase their feelings of solidarity with their families or other adults who could act as models for the young person.[6] It is interesting to note that while in American society we have said that children are influenced by their own peer group, we shove them into those peer groups more and more as if it is a fait accompli that cannot be changed. In that sense, we turn an effect into a cause, even though it need not have been intended that way.

Often in popular literature we make certain observations about adolescent behavior. Instead of analyzing what we see, we consider that the observation is synonomous with a reality that cannot be altered in any way. But it can be changed or mediated if we wish it to be.

[4] Daniel Offer, Eric Ostrov, Kenneth I. Howard and Robert Atkinson, The Teenage World. The Adolescent Self Image. New York: Plenum Medical Book Company, 1989. p. 124.

[5] Op. cit., p. 124.

[6] Networker, p. 26.

Teenagers want our adult support, although they do not always wish to admit it. They want independence from adults and dependence at the same time. This contradiction in their own minds is enough to give them frequent stomach aches or headaches. Adults, however, need to become mind readers and learn to sense the underlying contradictory feelings adolescents carry around with them. Adolescents would not feel proud of themselves, however, if they knew that adults were aware of these adolescent inner contradictions.

Gilligan indicates that the typical psychological view of adolescence "anchored in the values of separation and independence fails to represent the interdependence of adult life and thus conveys a distorted image of the human condition..."[7] She suggests that because women's views had been somewhat neglected in the study of adolescence, a scientific understanding of the feelings and confusion of adolescent girls is also missed in the literature. Girls are concerned about being cared for and also caring about others. Their views of "right and wrong" are associated with the caring theme.

If adolescents can become more involved in responsible adult work, they may sense where they fit in a complicated adult world. They may learn about the adversity adults face. They may learn how problems are defined, struggled with, agonized over and sometimes solved to one's satisfaction, however, sometimes they are not solved successfully to everyone's liking.

Baumrind also tells us that a false theme of individuation and the need to separate oneself from one's parents leads to feelings of alienation.[8]

[7]Carol Gilligan, "Adolescent Development Reconsidered," pp. 63-92 in New Directions for Child Development, No. 37, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Fall 1987.

[8]Diana Baumrind, " A Developmental Perspective on Adolescent Risk Taking in Contemporary America," pp. 93-125 in New Directions for Child Development, No. 37, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Fall, 1987. Pp. 107, 108.

Baumrind presents concepts on differences between the way the adolescents in affluent families adjust to changes. Their social reality is constructed in a matrix which seems "so malleable that it is experienced as hypothetical and unreal rather than challenging."[9] The social matrix in which low income younsters construct their reality "is often so intransigent and moribund that it provides them with a mortuary rather than a moratorium." [10] This also coincides with her essential recommendation that adolescence should be perceived in terms of the crucial differences that occur in the way youngsters adapt to their changes in growth and the philosophical views they have about themselves and the world. She says, "The psychosocial processes that define adolescence should be viewed as paths to be negotiated rather than as naturally evolving growth patterns that automatically affect all adolescents similarly."[11]

[9]Baumrind, p. 96.

[10]Loc. cit.

[11]Op. cit., p. 98.

Baumrind's concerns are interwoven through themes of the lack of support that adolescents receive from their parents and teachers because many adults have surrendered their positions of influence to peer groups. She suggests that peer groups **do** influence adolescent behavior but not always to the extent adults think is true. Young people need the suggestions and value orientations of their parents. She indicates that if adolescents of the last twenty -five years have increased their dependence on peers, it is more because the parents have chosen to withdraw from their adolescents' lives.[12] I am sure many parents would argue this point. They would say they have tried very hard to influence their adolescent children.

It seems that as adults we have to reassess our notions of what our children should be reaching for and how they may arrive at what they want. It is true that with a declining economy and difficulty in adolescents finding jobs, they also feel alienated from the work force of society. Several researchers have commented on the normlessness experienced by adolescents. Many are not sure where they fit. Society has not given them clear role sanctions. Connectedness to the family has to be balanced with expressions of the adolescent which indicate that he or she is being heard as an individual, but not necessarily an individual who wishes to surrender belonging to the family.

[12]Baumrind, p. 101.

Life is not necessarily consist of a constant state of happiness. Much of life is involved in problem solving--some of it serious, some of it not so life-threatening or psychologically frightening. To the adolescent, the adult appears to have everything--freedom of choice, complete independence, and money to support various choices and pleasures. How different all these things are in the mind of the adult. If we, as adults, wish to help adolescents deal with the complexities and anxieties of their world, we need in some way to reconcile not only what their problems are, but also how the world and, more directly, how **we** appear to them. We would like to help them dispel, or at least minimize their feelings of helplessness and anger if we can. This brings us to the fourth and final emphasis in the themes of this paper--the confusion that persists in adults' minds and the adolescents know it.

The **last theme** in this paper focuses on the confusion that adolescents know their parents and teachers have and the adolescents are angry that the adults who are supposed to guide them are not more sure of themselves. After all, how can the adults tell young people what to do when they do not know themselves? That does not seem to make sense to the adolescent. It is just another indication that the parents and teachers really do not respect the growing young person and are willing to let them do what they **think** they wish to do.

The study done by Offer et al concluded on an optimistic note.[13] The authors said that about 73% of the 5,900 adolescents they studied, suggest that the youngsters are able to see themselves in terms of a world view. They are aware of technological advantages and consider other people's well being as well as their own. Perhaps this 73% reflects adolescents who had supportive families and felt somewhat emotionally secure in the growing years.

Other works of many years focus on the difficulties faced by adolescent girls and boys. One writer reminds us that some girls are fiercely angry and are not sure why but they know that they do not want to be like their mothers when they mature.[14] They cooperate to some extent with social expectations for women, but they are furious at the same time to learn that men demean women and that men have more prestigeful positions and better pay than women in society. They are angry that they have to grow into this inferior role and become what they think has been upsetting to their mothers. When girls do not see their mothers take a stand for something they believe in or see their fathers demean their mothers, it is easy for the girls to think they will perpetuate this inferiority most of their lives. They do not look forward to that. In fact, they are rebelling against it.

[13] Offer et al, p. 124.

[14] Marsha Pravder Mirkin, "The New Alliance," Networker July/August1990, p. 38.

A counselor who worked with adolescents felt that the American view of separation from family that counselors so often concentrate on for young women unsettles what ought to be a more favorable view of one's family and parents. American attitudes approve the adolescent's downgrading of mothers even though our society values motherhood in some respects as an institution. In the development of a girl's independence, we should remember that while she can grow away from her mother and that a daughter may wish to be what her mother is **not**, we should nevertheless help the girl value her mother. Mirkin suggests that "young people must be able to fully welcome and enjoy the vital connections between themselves and their families, connections that can validate, rather than undermine their developing sense of individual selfhood."[15]

Aitkin and Chaplin say that we criticize teenagers for being unmotivated and wanting only to be entertained or to "party." Yet the media suggest that they should make money, look good, and be cool as well as being shifty--"trick people, get away with things, don't work to get something."[16] Many writers feel that parents do not spend enough time talking with their teenagers and telling them what really can count for them in the world. The skills and goals that can carry them through life and can allow them to value themselves are not typically emphasized by parents in a way that adolescents wish to accept such advice. Modeling or being the kind of parent that the adolescent can respect does help the adolescent in seeing what works and what can bring prestige to human beings in a society that is important to them.

Goldschmidt, too, makes the point that human beings have a career. He suggests that we go through life trying to gain some kind of individual merit. He sees prestige as the "very soul of the social order."[17] He also

[15] Mirkin, Op. cit., p. 41.

[16] Aitkin and Chaplin, Op. cit., p. 26.

[17] Walter Goldschmidt, The Human Career, The Self in the Symbolic World. Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990. p. 31

says that prestige "gives coherence to the community even while it expresses social differentiation; it gives purposes and direction to individual lives even while it is a matter conferred by the community; it is at one and the same time divisive and unifying."[18]

Teenagers need to learn about these contradictions. They need to learn that at times, the world will not seem so clear to them. Ambiguity is an essential part of life. We can only try to build on some values that we trust. We need to have faith that they will carry us through the rough times. At times we have to **wait for** that special goal to be in our hands despite a continued effort toward its achievement.

While teenagers like certainty and are impatient with others who do not seem to be crystal clear on what should be done in certain problematic cases, they also need to learn through examples that quick answers do not always bring the desired solutions. Impulsive action, in fact, may often work against the better choices that are in the adolescent's best interests.

Patience, persistence, deeper intentions to carry through on firm values can provide the payoff desired by adolescents. It requires some strong-hearted adults to sustain the idealistic adolescent. When the adult realizes how much an adolescent needs emotional support to ward off the empty feelings within, it is worth the time and effort to clarify the adolescent's confusion.

[18] Loc. cit., p. 31

Conclusions

This paper focused on four themes related to adolescence: where it has been and where it is going. The adolescent period perceived by adults who are responsible for teenagers are part of a mixed four-generation group of people. The group consists of parents, their parents, teachers of today, and other adults, such as counselors, therapists, and physicians who interact with and are responsible for the lives and well being of teenagers.

For the most part, we see that anger, frustration and alienation fill the lives of many adolescents who cannot seem to find themselves and an inner direction to achieve a satisfying identity. Some of them are so frustrated that they do not feel life is worth living. Our society seems to cast them aside just when they need to feel part of a larger group or community. They are alienated by their families in a quest for independence. Psychological themes associated with the need to individuate oneself from one's parents and famlies work against the notion that individuals need to be connected with others throughout life in one way or another. Writers suggest that adolescents should be helped not in achieving complete independence, but **interdependence**. In efforts to separate themselves from their parents upon whom they may have depended for financial, physical, and emotional support, they have completely isolated themselves without goals or substitution of direction. Society needs to redefine the adolescent role so that adolescents can be satisfied with who they are attempting to become, rather than feeling discontent with their efforts toward commitment. They need to receive satisfaction in caring for others and their ability to negotiate a healthy development.

In a complicated and technological society, adolescents need to know where they fit. They need to know they are valued and that they can make a significant contribution. In some cases, it might mean that they substitute peer choices of partying and "being cool" for adapting themselves to something that has depth and meaning for them. They may need to perspire, think, expose themselves to errors and dissatisfaction along the way. They may need to learn to persist despite the odds of frustrations while they are learning skills to help them obtain the goals

they desire. They may need help in maintaining goodwill and stamina required typically in sportsmanship.

Whatever the self-sufficency, distance, alienation, and unreachable levels (away from adults) preceived in the adolescents' posture, it is not always reflective of what they deeply feel. They may be **yearning** for someone to break through the barriers of adolescent nonchalance and haughtiness. They may be hoping that someone will rescue them from their own boredom and their worst fears that they may not amount to anything valued in our society. We need to help them and to be sensitive to what they are saying as well as what they are **not saying.** With added sensitivity on our parts, we may be able to create a new adolescent with their improved physical and mental health **and for ours as adults** in the twenty-first century.

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